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ABSTRACT

Modern transformational grammars can be effective tools for writing, for they offer hypotheses and generalizations about English sentences which can be used in an infinite number of linguistic contexts. One writing skill which transformational grammars can help students achieve is the ability to choose between synonymous expressions. Some transformations which have rhetorical significance are the passive voice, the "there" transformation, extraposition, and the cleft. Each of these transformations enables a writer to take different syntactic routes through a sentence. Another transformation which has rhetorical significance is clause consolidation, or the ability of a mature writer to embed a number of sentences into one. While this discussion of transformations does not prove the extent to which transformational grammar can be related to the teaching of writing, it can be useful in the evaluation of writing. (DI)

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Relating Transformational Grammar to the Teaching of Writing

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TRANSFORMATIONS AND STYLISTIC OPTIONS

The title which I chose for this address months before I actually wrote it contains the word "option," which means "the power or right of choosing," derived from the Latin optare, "to select." Obviously, this semantic choice indicates that I have elected to engage in a controversy, for it suggests that in his use of language man is not the passive product of genetic and environmental forces, that he does have creative will, that the manifestations of this will are not always predictable.

B.F. Skinner would not agree. The July 15, 1972 issue of the Saturday Review published an excerpt from Skinner's Cumulative Record: A Selection of Papers, entitled "On 'Having' a Poem." About half the essay reviews Skinner's old quarrel with Chomsky-- Chomsky wrote an unfavorable review of Skinner's Verbal Behavior in 1957-- before a statement of the thesis is made: a poet "has" a poem in much the same way a woman "has" a baby. A poem, Skinner believes, is a passive achievement, the product of the poet's genetic and environmental histories. Somewhat near the end, Skinner modifies the analogy, admitting that unlike a mother, "the poet has access to his poem during gestation. He may tinker with it. Bits and pieces occur to the poet, who rejects or allows them to stand, and who puts them together to compose a poem. But they come from his past history, verbal and otherwise, and he has to learn how to put them together."¹

¹B.F. Skinner, "On 'Having' a Poem," Saturday Review, 55:35 (July 15, 1972).

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In this now famous review of Skinner's book Chomsky rather mildly asserts that there is no evidence to support any specific claim about the "relative importance of 'feedback' from the environment and the 'independent contribution of the organism' in the process of language acquisition."² Both Skinner and Chomsky use the word "learn," though to Skinner learning is the differential reinforcement and to Chomsky it is a matter of developing the innate capacity to generalize, hypothesize and 'process information' in language acquisition.³

If as teachers of composition we lean toward Skinner, I suppose we emphasize models. For example, Franklin in his Autobiography describes how he taught himself to write by laboriously emulating the style of Addison. But if what we are really trying to do is to release linguistic creativity, then we must go beyond models and reinforcement. Modern transformational grammars can, if wisely used, be effective teaching instruments, for they offer hypotheses and generalizations about English sentences which can be utilized over and over again in an infinite number of linguistic contexts. No doubt writers with a touch of genius will develop their innate capacities to generalize about language without a teacher or a grammar, but it is helpful for ordinary people to be shown the way.

Two factors, it seems to me, determine whether a student can learn to write at all. First of all, he must be able to

²Noam Chomsky, "A Review of B.F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior (1959)," Chomsky: Selected Readings, ed. J.P.B. Allen and Paul van Buren (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 137.

³Ibid., p. 139.

distinguish between grammatical and ungrammatical statements, and second, he must be aware of the semantic and logical relationships that restrict his range of choice. Helping a student achieve such competence is itself a very large order, and many of us would settle for Plato's non-rhetoric, which stresses simply truth and logic and clarity. But there is also the Aristotelian goal of writing effectively, and to do that the writer must know how to choose between synonymous expressions. He must know his options so that he can choose the expression most likely to meet his rhetorical objectives.

We have ample evidence that professional writers do make conscious choices between similar statements. As an example we can look at three versions of Bryant's "Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood." In 1817 he wrote:

Misery is wed
To guilt. Hence in these shades we still behold
The abodes of gladness, here from tree to tree
And through the rustling branches flit the birds
In wantonness of spirit;-- theirs are strains
Of no dissembled rapture--

In 1821 he changed this passage to:

Misery is wed
To guilt. And hence the shades are still the abodes
Of undissembled gladness; the thick roof
Of green and stirring branches is alive
And musical with birds, that sing and sport
In wantonness of spirit. . . .

By 1832 Bryant had come to the reading now anthologized:

God hath yoked to guilt
Her pale tormentor, misery. Hence, these shades
Are still the abodes of gladness; the thick roof
Of green and stirring branches is alive
And musical with birds, that sing and sport
In wantonness of spirit. . . .⁴

⁴William Cullen Bryant, "Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood," The Literature of the United States, I, ed. Walter Blair et al. (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1969), p. 173.

There are, of course, several changes, but notice how Bryant stayed through two versions with the metaphor, "Misery is wed to guilt," stated in the passive voice. Then in his final version he chose the active statement, "God hath yoked to guilt/ Her pale tormentor, misery." Notice, too, that he changed "the abodes of gladness" from the complement of "behold," which focuses attention upon an indefinite "we" as subject, to the direct statement, ". . .these shades/Are still the abodes of gladness."

Writers at Work includes photographs of manuscript pages from rather famous literary works. There is evidence that linguistic choices were made right down to the final galley proofs. A proof of Saul Bellow's Herzog had this sentence: "Stiff and hesitant, she turned her body aside in her abrupt way, then, her decision reached, turned just as abruptly to him again." Reading the galleys, Bellow apparently decided against the absolute, "her decision reached," revising the sentence to read: "Then she came to a decision and turned to him with the same abruptness."⁵ Notice, too, that he substituted a phrase of manner, "with the same abruptness," for the adverb, "abruptly." Both these decisions -- to substitute the sentence for the absolute, the phrase for the adverb -- are merely syntactic choice, involving no semantic changes. Examples of artistic revisions can be multiplied, but I think that most writers do more than "tinker" with their manuscripts. I do not argue that Bryant or Bellow knew about transformational grammar; I merely suggest that they had a rather sophisticated knowledge about language.

⁵Writers at Work, Third Series, ed. George Plimpton (New York: The Viking Press, 1967), p. 176.

The property of language which allows for such options, or choices, is synonymy, the basic identity of meaning between two or more utterances, which, according to Jacobs and Rosenbaum in Transformations, Style, and Meaning, is to be found in every language.⁶ Basic meaning, as they define it, is roughly what two or more paraphrases of a sentence have in common, while surface meaning adds that extra dimension of style resulting from personal choice. Most teachers of composition have, I believe, long realized this property of language, even at the level of teaching basic sentence patterns. English has such alternative patterns as:

He farms.	He is a farmer.
He organizes.	He is an organizer.
The paint will become hard.	The paint will harden.
Jim is an athlete.	Jim is athletic.
He criticized his parents.	He was critical of his parents.

In these sentences the lexical items are identical; all that is involved is morphophonemic transformation. The fact that any native speaker of English will recognize the sentences in each pair as synonymous suggests that they have the same basic meaning in the deep structure of language. Each represents, however, a different surface structure which gives form to the meaning. It is at this level that stylistic options are made, often intuitively, though they can be described systematically in terms of transformations. English has some transformation rules that are rhetorically very useful.

Two types of sentence patterns widely discussed in rhetorics are

⁶Roderick A. Jacobs and Peter S. Rosenbaum, Transformations, Style, and Meaning (Waltham, Mass.: Xerox College Publishing, 1971), p. 1.

the passive and the there. One popular college rhetoric has on its check list the item, "No passive, no There is." A qualifying statement at the bottom of the list reads, "When setting any of these points aside, be sure you have a good rhetorical reason for doing so."⁷ It is obvious that the author accepts the principle of linguistic choice. Most native writers of English are aware that a sentence with a transitive verb can be expressed in two different ways, but when they become mired in a bad passive they can not always find their way back to shore. Sometimes it is not clear to younger writers that the passive transformation allows for the deletion of the phrase of agency, for example, and thus they do not know what the original subject in active voice was. In this passive sentence, "Both gold and silver were coined," only the context would reveal the agent. To re-route the sentence, the writer must supply the lost subject before he can perform the general shift back to active voice. If the emphasis requires that the agent be expressed, the return to active voice may be important: "The government coined both gold and silver." Sometimes the passive is merely clumsy: "This was immediately realized by me." In either situation, the transformation rules clearly specify the relationship between the two voices and show the writer how to move freely back and forth. In Grammar as Style, Virginia Tufte has an excellent chapter on stylistic uses of the passive. Here are two of her examples:

⁷Sheridan Baker, The Complete Stylist (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1966), end pages.

They sailed and trailed and flew and raced and
drawled and walked and were carried, finally, home.

-John Knowles, Indian Summer, p. 4.

It is men tormenting and killing a bull; it is a
bull being tormented and killed.

-Max Eastman, Art and the Life of Action, p. 90.

Notice that in both sentences it is the contrast between the active and passive verbs that is important to the rhetorical emphasis.

Except for widely used colloquial patterns, such as "There were six people in the room," the there transformation involves a rather literary type of inversion which breaks with the normally anticipated subject-predicate order. I doubt that the writer of this biographical sketch of Poe could have avoided the there transformation in "There are, to be sure, elements of strangeness in the life of this neurotic genius,"⁹ since be lacks a complement. But in this sentence an element of stylistic choice seems apparent: "There followed a period of service in the army (1827-1829), an unhappy brief career at West Point (1830-1831), and a final break with Allan (1832)."¹⁰ The writer cannot pull the intransitive verb "followed" to the front of the sentence without filling the subject slot with there. The real subject-- the rather long series-- then concludes the sentence. This arrangement gives the writer a strategic advantage: he avoids the anti-climactic word order which would result if the long subject were followed by the one-word verb. Psycholinguists have told us that our memories

⁸Virginia Tufte, Grammar as Style (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971), p. 205.

⁹Blair et al., ed., p. 231.

¹⁰Ibid.

tolerate right-branching sentences-- that is, sentences weighted nearer the period-- more easily than those that keep the finite verb a mystery. This factor seems to be one of the advantages in knowing how to apply the there transformation.

Two other transformations make it possible for the writer to focus attention at the end of the sentence: the extraposition transformation involving it and the cleft transformation. The extraposition transformation lets the writer choose between "That you are so careless concerns me" and "It concerns me that you are so careless." Again, I think, the grammar permits the writer to place the weighty subject at the end, where it is more tolerable. The cleft transformation lets the writer choose between "The enthusiasm of the young actors pleased the audience" and "What pleased the audience was the enthusiasm of the young actors." Although the sentences appear synonymous, as they probably are in the deep structure, the cleft transformation focuses attention upon the noun phrase at the end.

These four transformations-- the passive, there, extraposition, and cleft-- enable a writer to take different syntactic routes through a sentence as it surfaces into rhetoric. The rhetorical imperatives of the message, its occasion, and the voice of the writer will determine syntactic decisions even as they decide larger matters of genre and tone. Out of context it is difficult to make a value judgment between syntactic alternatives; what is important is that such a judgment can be made.

Another area of decision making involves what Kellogg Hunt has referred to as clause consolidation. In an essay, "How Little

Sentences Grow into Big Ones," he demonstrates how a superior adult writer consolidates seventeen sentences into one.¹¹ One transformation which makes this consolidation easy is the restrictive relative clause, which provides a way of specifying an infinite number of entities without seriously annoying the reader. This is the embedding process which allows us to say: "This is the dog that chased the cat that ate the rat that lived in the house that Jack built." In each case the relative clause modifies a general class noun to specify not an entire class but a single entity-- not just any house but one house, the house that Jack built.

Deletions in the relative clause account for all modifiers embedded in the noun phrase, including the adjective, the prepositional phrase, and the participle. For this reason a writer can frequently exercise some options. "Today came a rain that was soothing" can be "Today came a soothing rain." "The squirrels that were playing in the yard. . ." can be "The squirrels playing in the yard. . . ." "The blue jay that is in the pear tree. . ." can be "The blue jay in the pear tree. . . ." I suppose every teachers of composition has at some time shown students how that can vary their sentences and reduce the number of words by utilizing these options. We don't really need the transformation rules, but I have discovered that they are powerful because of their very simplicity. Intuitive notions can be comfortably gathered under one hypothesis.

The non-restrictive relative clause and its reduction

¹¹Kellogg Hunt, "How Little Sentences Grow into Big Ones," New Directions in Elementary English, ed. Alexander Frazier (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1967), pp. 122-23.

transformations are even more productive in teaching composition. Much of the so-called Christensen program in composition rests upon these transformations. All of us, I suppose, have valiantly tried to explain the difference between "The boys who were playing baseball lived in the apartment house" and "The boys, who were playing baseball, lived in the apartment house." The first, we say, means that only the boys that were playing baseball lived in the apartment house. The restrictive clause identifies the class noun, boys. The second, we say, means that the boys played baseball and incidentally lived in the apartment house, showing that we intuitively feel the non-restrictive clause is really an alternative to coordination or conjunction: "The boys were playing baseball, and they lived in the apartment house." For this reason the clause is sometimes called a sentence modifier, or a free modifier. Jacobs and Rosenbaum admit that the precise form of the non-restrictive clause transformation and its relation to the restrictive clause are not yet clear.¹²

The relative clause reduction processes that work for the restrictive clause also work for the non-restrictive. It is probably safe to say that adjectives, prepositional phrases, and participles derived from non-restrictive clauses are also non-restrictive. The rhetorical advantage is not only reduced structures but also the possibility of re-positioning. Let me illustrate: "The November sky deepened his gloom. The sky was gray and overcast," can be rewritten: "The November sky, which was gray and overcast. . . ."

¹²Jacobs and Rosenbaum, p. 101.

This can then become "The November sky, gray and overcast, deepened his gloom or "Gray and overcast, The November sky deepened his gloom." Because these reduced modifiers are free-moving, the writer can experiment with their positioning and alter his rhythms or change his emphasis. Notice how the positioning of three non-restrictive phrases before the subject allows Durrell to achieve a climax in the final noun clause that states his revelation: "Living on this bare promontory, snatched every night from darkness by Arcturus, far from the lime-laden dust of those summer afternoons, I see at last that none of us is properly to be judged for what happened in the past."¹³

One structure derived from the non-restrictive clause deserves to be singled out for special emphasis. I refer to the appositive, traditionally described as a noun set down beside another noun to define, describe, or explain. Notice the derivation: "Mr. Webster scrawled a note to the chairman. Mr. Webster was the distinguished Senator from Massachusetts," can be transformed to "Mr. Webster, who was the distinguished Senator from Massachusetts. . . ." to "Mr. Webster, the distinguished Senator from Massachusetts. . . ." Appositives do not always have to follow the related noun phrase. Observe the positioning at the opening of the sentence: "A man of absolute principle, Webster was honored in Washington." Here the appositive concludes: "From distant states the people come to Washington-- politicians, lobbyists, newspaper reporters, protesters, and tourists." An intensive study of the appositive in professional writing will show that it can be used to

¹³Lawrence Durrell, Justine, p. 3.

develop almost any logical relationship, including example, comparison, qualification, analysis, summary. It is worthwhile to pause and teach the stylistic use of the appositive, for amateurs seldom use it intuitively.

The absolute transformation is another structure widely used in descriptive and narrative writing but seldom, if ever, in speech. Although it is a rather literary structure, it is a convenient method for adding specific details to a general image presented in a matrix sentence: "He was a tall gaunt man, his face wrinkled with pain, his hair snow-white." Sometimes the absolute defines the verb: "He spoke more and more slowly, his voice dragging into threads of honey, his taunts uttered in dulcet tones." The transformation rule that changes a sentence into an absolute calls for merely the removal of tense: "His taunts (were) uttered in dulcet tones." Like ^{of} other non-restrictive modifiers, absolutes can, of course, be repositioned.

This Brief discussion of a few transformations does not, of course, prove the extent to which transformational grammars can be related to the teaching of writing. A modest proposal is that they can be useful in the evaluation of writing generated intuitively by Chomsky's language mechanism and Skinner's reinforcement. The rhetorical kinds of sentence arrangements evolving from conscious choice have been described in classical rhetorics as figures of speech; many of them can also be described more systematically as transformations.

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